

Iinnii Initiative

Keith Aune

Our Story

For tens of thousands of years, buffalo fundamentally shaped the ecology of prairie ecosystems and Native American cultures. Immense herds grazed and enriched the grasslands and mountain foothills across North America. Acting as bio-engineers on this landscape, buffalo shaped plant communities, transported and recycled nutrients, created habitat variability that benefited grassland birds, insects, and small mammals, and provided abundant food resources for species such as grizzly bears and wolves. Buffalo also, more than any other species, linked Native people to the land. Following the great slaughter of the 19th Century, buffalo are physically absent from both the land and these buffalo cultures. There is growing recognition that the absence of buffalo has led to deterioration of the ecological health of the area and represents a cultural loss to Native people.

In 2009, representing the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), I began quiet conversations with the Blackfeet people to consider bison restoration in the majestic landscape along the Glacier-Waterton Front. After hosting several lengthy dialogs among Blackfeet elders and tribal members, we initiated a culture-based bison restoration and conservation effort referred to as the Iinnii (buffalo) Initiative. This grassroots group of community and cultural leaders has crafted a holistic vision that calls for a renewed and sustained relationship between Blackfeet people, bison, and nature.

In May 2011, WCS hosted the Iinnii Initiative kick-off meeting with 85 tribal members present, including youth, community leaders, and tribal elders. At this meeting, we endorsed a vision statement and developed a strategic framework for returning buffalo to Blackfeet lands and restoring ecosystem health and cultural connections to buffalo. The Iinnii Vision Statement developed by these thoughtful Blackfeet best articulates the nature of that vision.

Iinnii Vision Statement: *Hundreds of generations of Blackfoot have come and gone on the northwestern plains since before and after the melting of the glaciers that covered the northern part of North America. For all of those generations IINNIIWA has been our relative. IINNIIWA is part of us and we, Sokitapiwa, are part of IINNIIWA culturally, materially, and spiritually. Our ongoing relationship is so close that we have stories of common consanguinity. IINNIIWA is so close to us that IINNIIWA is the essence of our life and life-ways. We, members of Sokitapiwa, calling ourselves the Buffalo People, hereby declare our intention to revitalize our relationship with IINNIIWA by welcoming IINNIIWA home to again live among us as Creator intended. It is our intention to realize the presence of IINNIIWA among us by doing everything within our means so that we will again live together, to nurture each other culturally and spiritually. It is our intention to provide a space and a safe environment for IINNIIWA so that together we can again nurture our land, our holy plants, and our animal relatives so that we can both realize the Buffalo Ways for our future generations.*

Our project goals and strategy were carefully constructed through a series of meetings and frequent council with the tribal elders. The initiative has three main goals: 1) preserving an enduring conservation landscape; 2) restoring bison to this spectacular landscape; and 3) connecting our restoration efforts to economic sustainability. The Iinnii Initiative strategy is graphically displayed in the form of a traditional medicine wheel with our first step displayed in the east (right side of circle) facing the rising sun (see Strategic Plan document link above).

The initial steps described in the strategy focus on work within the tribal community and with local governance to build and inspire community support for the conservation of a future homeland for bison. As we progress through this strategic wheel of actions and tasks the initiative is supported by baseline field research/monitoring and conservation planning to properly prepare for the return of bison.

The Innii Initiative comes at an important time for the protection of key lands and wildlife on the Rocky Mountain Front near Glacier National Park, Waterton Park, and the Lewis and Clark National Forest. On this northern portion of the Front, several threats have emerged that make the success of the Innii Initiative even more urgent. The Blackfoot Nation in the United States has leased most of its tribal lands to energy companies and approved 88 oil and gas drilling permits.

In addition, the expanding national electric grid has prompted increased interest in leasing wind farm sites along the Montana-Alberta Tie Line. Finally, historic grazing programs on tribal lands need reform because current grazing intensity has reduced the effectiveness of fish and wildlife habitats. The potential impact of these collective threats has amplified the importance of new land protection measures and habitat conservation in this geography.

To date, WCS and tribal partners have been able to take many small but important steps on the journey to bring buffalo back to Blackfoot Country. We have developed community outreach and education materials including an Innii Initiative brochure, inspirational DVD (available on YouTube) about the initiative, and a novel teaching curriculum used by the local schools and partially developed by student interns. We have advocated for conservation and restoration in this landscape at many venues including stakeholder meetings, science workshops at Blackfoot Community College (BCC), local and regional Powwows, the annual North American Indian Days, and Crown of the Continent Roundtable.

We have enabled six BCC student interns and one MSU graduate student to participate in conservation activities and research. Through our partnership with BCC we hosted an economic summit at the annual "Days of the Blackfoot" event in 2012 to explore how best to enhance the nature-based sector of the regional economy. In addition, we combined our technical GIS capacities to develop a set of conservation maps illustrating intact wildlife habitats and the current distribution of key fish and wildlife species across the region.

Recently a business planning workgroup was established to develop a restoration strategy and business plan to lay out a clear path toward our goal of restoring bison and conserving intact lands along the mountain front.

Ultimately, we hope to design and implement habitat restoration strategies and a bison reintroduction that can be widely supported by tribal communities and federal land management agencies. These strategies will harmonize with other conservation efforts by the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Waterton Lakes National Park to preserve the area's ecological significance and cultural importance.

Partners

The Innii Initiative is fundamentally based upon human relationships and partnerships. In particular, WCS and the Innii Initiative team have developed crucial relationships with biological and administrative staff at Glacier National Park, Lewis and Clark National Forest, and Waterton National Park who practice conservation in this geography. More specifically, we work with the following key partner organizations and individuals:

- **Blackfoot Community College (BCC)—Keith Tatsey, Lea Whitford, Carol Murray, and Terry Tatsey:** Terry brings exceptional experience in agriculture and Keith teaches natural resource management at BCC. This program is designed to give students broad exposure to natural resources. The students gain a unique understanding of how the Blackfoot understood and used the natural world for their survival. Keith and Terry will provide their expertise in project design, their local knowledge of the area and its natural resources, and access to Native American students at the BCC interested in protecting local natural resources. We will reach out to many other professional staff like Carol and Lea who teach at BCC and support our student internships.
- **University of Lethbridge-Native Studies Program—Leroy Littlebear and Amethyst First Rider:** Leroy and Amethyst are professors at the University of Lethbridge and teach Native American Studies. Amethyst teaches Native literature and drama. Leroy Little Bear is Head of the SEED Graduate Institute,

former Director of the American Indian Program at Harvard University, and Professor Emeritus of Native Studies. Leroy focuses his instruction on the collaboration of Native and Western science. Both Leroy and Amethyst have been active in promoting better federal and provincial policy for First Nations across Canada and are members of the Blood Tribe in Canada.

- **The Native Science Field Center—Helen Augare and Melissa Weatherwax:** Native Science Field Programs focus on helping youth create biodiversity profiles for their local community and learn more about native species from scientific, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Knowing the biodiversity of an area is vital to beginning to understand and enjoy the ecological health of a place, including the land, water, and all living things. Integrating cultural ways of understanding with Western science ecological studies promotes appreciation of and respect for Native American homelands. Helen and Melissa will bring their expertise in teaching Native American students about nature and the importance of conservation from a Blackfeet cultural perspective.
- **Blackfeet Land Management—Mark McGee and Ervin Carlson:** The Blackfeet Land Management Office makes important land use decisions and provides GIS capacity to the tribal lands programs. Mark McGee is the Land Management Program Director and brings extensive experience in local management of tribal lands within the Blackfeet Nation Reserve. The Land Management Program manages grazing programs and allotment allocations for the Blackfeet Tribe and has a geospatial laboratory that can provide critical GIS data to our planning efforts. Ervin Carlson is the Blackfeet Tribe Bison Program Director and President of the Intertribal Buffalo Council. He has expertise in bison management and currently manages the current bison program on the Blackfeet Reservation.
- **Blood Tribe Lands Program—Elliot Fox and Kansie Fox:** The Blood Tribe owns the largest reserve in Canada; however, the traditional territory of this and other Blackfeet Tribes extends to southwestern Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, and south into Montana and Wyoming. The Blood Reserve is just east of Waterton National Park in southern Alberta. The Blood Tribe manages a mountain forested land very near Waterton Park and a larger prairie landscape to the east where farming and agriculture are dominant. The seat of government is in Stand-off Alberta. The tribal population includes about 10,000 members who have retained much of their traditional ways. The Blood Tribe Land Management Environmental Protection Division was established in 2003 with grassroots guidance from tribal elders and the Community Advisory Group.
- **Harmony Walkers Consulting—Harley Bastien and Paulette Fox:** Harley Bastien is the Executive Director and co-owner of Harmony Walkers Consulting firm which consults on many environmental issues in south central Canada. Paulette Fox is a consulting environmental scientist for the firm. Harley is a member of the Pikanni Nation and Paulette, the Blood Tribe. Both have been very active in the Iinnii Initiative bringing their expertise in environmental planning and business to the team. Harley has been active for many years in a grassroots fish rescue project while Paulette has served as instructor at the Red Crow Community College in Alberta.

In addition to the above, we regularly communicate with the National Parks Conservation Association, The Crown Managers Partnership, Crown Roundtable, Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, Bison Belong, Blackfeet Headwaters Alliance, and the Crown of the Continent Conservation Initiative. We anticipate few opponents to our initiative's efforts; however, some members of the tribal ranching community may consider this effort a threat to agricultural operations in the region, while some competing industries may view our activities as a potential threat to current or proposed industrial development. We will continue to forge important partnerships through community outreach, cooperative planning, and extended dialogs to promote broad support.

Creating a Legacy

The Glacier-Waterton Front offers one of the greatest opportunities in land and wildlife conservation in North America: the chance to restore and preserve all native wildlife including a full complement of carnivores in a largely intact landscape. The Blackfoot Confederacy (which includes the tribes of the United States and Canada) collectively refer to themselves as the "Buffalo People," and are striving to conserve their lands and heritage.

We have been engaging a passionate circle of tribal elders in our initiative to maintain a wise voice for conservation within the tribal community despite the often tumultuous nature of tribal government. With strong ties to cultural leaders within tribal communities the initiative has been successful in gaining support from the most important people who can influence decisions. Through the support of these recognized tribal elders and leaders we have enabled powerful advocates to speak out for land conservation, bison restoration, youth education, and cultural preservation.

Blackfeet youth are the next generation of conservationists who will sustain a large landscape conservation vision. WCS has been engaging Blackfeet students and youth in conservation through community outreach programs, university graduate studies, tribal fish and wildlife projects, and student internships at the BCC. Through a partnership with the Native Science Field Center on the BCC campus, we have engaged six student interns in teaching the elementary and high school students through interactive educational programs about bison, wildlife conservation, and traditional relationships with nature. These youth and BCC staff have created a customized and age-specific curriculum designed to teach about wildlife, language, and culture.

Through the Linnii Initiative we envision a sustainable and vibrant future for healthy tribal land, wild bison, the regional economy, and a revitalized ancient culture.

Take Action

WCS is acting as fiscal agent for the Linnii Initiative and donations can be made to our North America Program to sustain funding for the project.

At the North America Program office of WCS (Bozeman, MT) and at the field level we do accept volunteers who can commit time and expertise to our initiative. We are currently looking for individuals with business planning experience to help tribal entrepreneurs to begin nature-based businesses that support our conservation initiative. The Linnii Initiative also seeks experts to support conservation actions and field projects. These might also include professional ecologist and biologists, bison experts, students, and educators.

The Linnii Initiative project partners often seek volunteers willing to participate in citizen science such as wildlife inventory, habitat mapping, and population monitoring, or to help with community outreach and education events.

To support our business plans we also seek venture capitalists who might partner with tribal entrepreneurs wishing to create a new nature-based business in the region.

Who is Keith Aune?

Keith Aune MS.C. is Senior Conservationist, **Wildlife Conservation Society**. **Keith** received his Masters Degree in Fish and Wildlife Management from Montana State University. **Keith** comes to WCS from the **Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP)** where he served for 31 years in various capacities. He conducted field and laboratory research on black and grizzly bears, wildlife diseases, wolverine, lions, and bison. **Keith** worked on the research and management of Yellowstone bison for 10 years. While at his last post with MFWP he served as the Chief of Wildlife Research and directed multiple research projects across Montana as well as supervising the annual harvest survey and the Wildlife Research Laboratory staff. Since coming to WCS in 2007, **Keith** has worked on several issues including the WCS Wildlife Corridors Initiative, the American Bison Society Initiative and senior advisor to our Wildlife Action Opportunities Fund. In 2011 he became director for the WCS-North American Bison Program and the American Bison Society initiative. He is currently **chair of the IUCN Bison Specialist Group for North America** (International Union for Conservation of Nature is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization). **WCS's leader for the Linnii Initiative.**